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**MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE; IT'S TIME TO PULL THE
MILITARY OUT OF DRUG INTERDICTION**

Core Course 5605 Essay

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“For if he prepares to the front his rear will be weak, and if he prepares to the left, his right will be vulnerable [Who] prepares everywhere, will be weak everywhere ”

Sun Tzu

“Repression, no matter how extreme, is incapable of controlling the complexities of the international narcotics trade ”

Alfred W McCoy & Alan A Block

“If measured solely in terms of price and purity, cocaine, heroin, and marijuana prove to be more available than they were a decade ago ”

The 1997 National Drug Control Strategy

Introduction

When the Department of Defense was brought into counter-narcotics operations in the mid-1980s, our senior leadership perceived the drug war¹ to be a very linear campaign That is, senior decision makers believed that increases in detection and interdiction assets would produce proportionate increases in drug seizures Thus, by employing the military to dramatically increase our interdiction capability, the leadership hoped to cripple smuggling organizations But the impact of military support to interdiction was brief and indecisive Smugglers have long since adapted, and it is now clear that the interdiction campaign’s contribution to controlling the price and supply of drugs is, and will continue to be, negligible

This paper argues that, because of smuggler adaptation, drug interdiction has been an ineffective, sometimes counterproductive, element of our strategy, and that the military resources devoted to that effort should therefore be reprogrammed Especially at this time, when our military is balancing diminishing resources and increasing operational demands, we must take a critical look at the need for continuing the current high levels of military support to drug

¹ The term ‘drug war,’ coined by President Bush in 1989, is out of vogue because it conveys a strategic vulnerability that is unrealistic The term is not used in government documents or statements I use it here because it is commonly used by the media and in unofficial writings

interdiction. In fact, our national effort against drugs would lose little by releasing the bulk of the military's counter-narcotics assets to other, mainstream defense missions.

Drug Interdiction, The Vision at the Outset

Our national drug control strategy employs a wide array of methods that serve one of two ends, either the reduction of demand for drugs, or reduction of the supply of drugs. The supply reduction pillar of our strategy has two major components, source-country efforts (e.g., crop eradication, destruction of drug labs, etc.) and interdiction. Both efforts have become highly militarized.

Each year we engage in a national debate about the relative effectiveness of our drug control programs with a view toward determining the optimum mix and priority of the effort's many strands. Both the Reagan and Bush administrations emphasized supply reduction efforts over demand reduction by two-to-one in terms of funding. Their legacy to us is an enormous and enduring drug interdiction regime. The military's role in that regime, which began as a modest augmentation of traditional law enforcement agencies (i.e., the Coast Guard and Customs Service), has grown beyond anything imagined when it began.

An observer transported from the mid-1980s to today would be shocked to find that the military's role in counter-narcotics operations has become uncontroversial. Today, the military's ongoing counter-narcotics operations are just another part of the landscape of "operations other than war." The utility of counter-narcotics operations goes virtually unchallenged. In fact, these operations are often embraced as a bulwark of the sort of enduring, low-end, bread-and-butter operations that make up the bulk of the military's routine work.

But individually and collectively, the services fought involvement in the drug war until it was mandated by Presidential directive in 1981, and by statute in 1989. For several years after

the decision mandating military involvement, the services resisted counter-narcotics through bureaucratic interference and other subtle forms of resistance

When dedicated military assistance to counter-narcotics began in earnest, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) forecast that the military would drive our interdiction rate up from 10 percent, where it had languished for a decade, to 50 percent or higher. Optimism over the military's involvement was such that in 1988, the ONDCP officially established the goal of achieving a drug-free America by 1995.

What strategy promised such dramatic results? The strategic ends of interdiction were to reduce the supply of drugs, raise prices, reduce profits, and deter smugglers from delivering their product. Secondly, interdiction was to serve as a source of intelligence and was symbolic of our national commitment.² Of course, 1996, the year of a drug-free America, has come and gone and our national drug crisis endures.

The Problem of Drug Interdiction

What went wrong? First, hard as it is to believe in hindsight, many of our national leaders failed to understand the abiding limitations of an interdiction campaign. Of the six major government studies of the role and potential of interdiction that were conducted prior to 1986, none of them forecast that smuggler adaptation might outpace the interdiction effort.³ Thus, relying on unrealistically optimistic studies, senior decision makers greatly overestimated interdiction's potential. Our military was pushed headlong into the interdiction effort based on deeply flawed expectations.

² Drug Abuse Policy Office, Office of Policy Development, The White House. 1984 National Strategy for Prevention of Drug Abuse and Drug Trafficking. Government Printing Office, Washington DC.

³ Peter Reuter, Gordon Crawford, and Jonathan Cave, Sealing the Borders, The Effects of Increased Military Participation in Drug Interdiction, (Santa Monica CA: RAND, 1988), 4.

But adaptation and learning are what smugglers do best. When smugglers first began bringing large amounts of marijuana up from Colombia in 1975, their methods were crude by any standard. Fishing boats were fully loaded with large bales of contraband and they sailed direct from Colombia past Cuba into Florida. Over the intervening years, routes and methods have evolved toward ever more sophisticated techniques.

For a while, cocaine smuggling had shifted almost exclusively to transportation by air with drugs delivered either directly into the U.S., into a third country, or dropped to waiting boats. Smuggling by ship, less common now than it used to be, is characterized by circuitous routes and extremely elaborate methods of concealment. Third countries are increasingly used as way points and safe havens for air and maritime traffic, and large quantities of drugs are mixed in shipping containers with legitimate commercial cargo.

There is no logical end to the smuggler's capacity for adaptation. And it has always been the case that when the smuggler adapts, the interdiction problem gets more expensive and more intractable. Even if we could effectively counter current smuggling methods, the smuggler would find better alternatives that would be cost effective for him in the long run.

The Military's Role

The military entered the drug war when counter-narcotics was still a very limited, almost exclusively maritime campaign. Navy ships and National Guard and Air Force planes took the interdiction effort from the natural choke points off of Cuba and Puerto Rico deep into the Caribbean, right down to the Colombian territorial sea. Still, the geographic scope of the interdiction campaign was quite limited. But as the smuggler developed evasive methods and routes, the geographic scope and operational complexity of the problem grew.

We now find ourselves sustaining interdiction efforts throughout the Caribbean (including the Gulf of Mexico and Bahamas), all along the land border with Mexico, and well into the waters of the Pacific. The area of operations for the interdiction campaign, which as late as 1982 was confined to less than 200 miles of ocean across three natural choke points (the Yucatan Strait, Windward Passage, and Mona Passage), now extends 4,000 miles from points east of Venezuela, across the Caribbean, along the U S -Mexican border, to somewhere far into the Pacific Ocean.

The Impact of Drug Interdiction

As already noted, the strategic ends of interdiction were these: to reduce supply, increase price, reduce profits, and deter smuggling. Let's look briefly at our record in these

In the case of marijuana, interdiction forced production to move from Colombia to Mexico and then in to the United States. In fact, the U S is now the number one source country for marijuana. The "success" of interdiction, prompted adaptations that have greatly complicated the marijuana law enforcement problem. Domestic production has reduced prices and decentralized distribution, while indoor agronomic techniques have greatly increased potency. Annual seizures of marijuana now total less than 50,000 pounds – an amount we were seizing every five to six days throughout the period 1979-81. And it must be noted that the interdiction rate that forced such dramatic adaptations was primarily due to marijuana's relative bulkiness, a constraint that does not apply to cocaine, heroin, or any of the other drugs likely to be smuggled in the future.

As marijuana production migrated north, Colombian smugglers changed their operations into production and sale of cocaine. The amount of cocaine entering the country has risen

steadily from less than 50 metric tons in 1972 to about 314 metric tons today ⁴ Prices have fallen steadily from about \$60,000 per kilogram a decade ago to \$20,000 per kilogram now ⁵ What's more, despite decreases in the price, profits from smuggling cocaine have risen due to greater efficiencies It is also true that cocaine purity levels have improved markedly in recent years (from about 40 percent in 1977 to 80 percent in 1992)

Interdiction's long term capacity to increase the price of drugs and reduce consumption was greatly over estimated Almost a decade ago, RAND concluded that interdiction was unlikely to affect the availability of cocaine because of excess capacity and because the costs of smuggling accounted for only a small portion of the final retail costs ⁶ The retail price of cocaine is made impervious to the impact of interdiction because of the huge profit margin involved The entire chain of cocaine growing, processing and transportation accounts for only 8-10 percent of the retail price of cocaine Profits are so high that it has been estimated that smuggling organizations could lose 70-80 percent of their product and still remain profitable What's more, an impossible 50 percent interdiction rate would only increase the retail price by three percent ⁷

Neither has drug interdiction affected the availability of drugs The 1997 Drug Strategy concedes that "illegal drugs continue to be readily available almost anywhere in the United States " Cocaine production increases every year ⁸ And despite the fact that almost a third of the cocaine produced in South America is seized or destroyed, coca paste prices have decreased

⁴ Several sources See The National Drug Control Strategy 1997, Office of National Drug Control Policy, The White House, 10, and Peter Rydell, *Controlling Cocaine* (RAND), xviii

⁵ Vincent T. Bugliosi, *The Phoenix Solution, Getting Serious About Winning America's Drug War* (Beverly Hills CA: Dove Books, 1996), 13

⁶ Peter Reuter, Gordon Crawford, and Jonathan Cave, *Sealing the Borders*, xi

⁷ Statistics in this paragraph from Eva Bertram and Kenneth Sharpe, *The Unwinnable Drug War What Clausewitz Would Tell Us*, *World Policy Journal* (Winter 1996/1997)

by 50 percent because the remainder still exceeds both demand and the trafficker's transportation capacity⁹ With regard to cocaine, one analyst recently noted that, because of excess capacity, "whatever amount of drugs we seize has no impact on the amount still available"¹⁰

Lastly, interdiction has not reduced profits from narcotics smuggling Obviously, precise data is not available on illegal profits, but most analysts agree that the combination of law enforcement, which justifies high price mark-ups, and smuggler adaptation, which tends to achieve greater efficiencies, results in ever higher profits¹¹ Colombian cartels and the larger Mexican groups are estimated to be clearing about \$300 million in annual profits¹²

By other measures as well, serious drug abuse is level or increasing Drug related arrests dipped slightly from 1989 to 1991 but then rose to historic highs in 1996 Drug offenders account for about three quarters of the growth in federal prison population since 1980¹³ Overall drug-related emergency room episodes have increased sharply each of the past five years Heroin-related emergency room incidents increased by 124 percent over the last five years and deaths from all drug abuse increased 47 percent between 1990 and 1994 to approximately 14,000 per year¹⁴

But all the news is not bad Federal efforts to decrease drug abuse have had some positive effects The number of persons who currently use drugs of abuse on a regular basis is estimated to be 12.8 million Americans, a decline of almost 50 percent since the 1979 high of 25

⁸ Many sources See U S Department of State, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), March 1996, 3

⁹ The National Drug Control Strategy 1997, 54

¹⁰ Bugliosi, 2

¹¹ Bertram and Sharpe

¹² Paul Stares, Global Habit, The Drug Problem in a Borderless World, (Washington DC Brookings Institute, 1996), 54

million¹⁵ Most of the decline represents progress against casual users of marijuana However, the number of casual users of cocaine has also decreased dramatically, from about 5.7 million in 1985 to about 1.5 million in 1995¹⁶ But the decline in casual use can be misleading The 1997 National Drug Strategy concludes

“While these figures indicate significant progress, the number of frequent users [of marijuana, cocaine or heroin] has not changed markedly since 1985 [C]hronic users account for two-thirds of the U.S. demand for cocaine Thus, while the number of users has dropped, the *amount* of cocaine consumed in America has not declined commensurably”

So while the number of chronic abusers of marijuana, cocaine, and heroin have leveled off or only increased slightly since 1992, the people who are consuming the bulk of illegal drugs today are chronic users They are the type of users who are not likely to be influenced by changes in the price of drugs

From the above discussion we can conclude that the strategic ends of interdiction have not been achieved Neither the availability nor total quantity of drugs has declined Profits are huge and have probably increased, while prices have decreased and purity has improved Nor, obviously, have drug smugglers been deterred from bringing their product to market Where we have achieved success has been in reducing the number of casual drug abusers

The Size of Federal and Military Counter-Narcotics Operations

The Federal budget for counter-narcotics grew from \$53 million in 1970¹⁷ to about \$15 billion in 1997 Of that, about two-thirds, or \$10 billion, is directed toward supply reduction strategies Despite President Clinton’s campaign promises to emphasize treatment over law enforcement, the proportion of funding between supply and demand reduction has remained the

¹³ The National Drug Control Strategy 1997, 19-20

¹⁴ Statistics from The National Drug Control Strategy 1997

¹⁵ Ibid, 9

¹⁶ Ibid, 10

same as it was under Presidents Reagan and Bush. Total interdiction funding for all agencies in 1997 is \$1.588 billion.

The U.S. has invested roughly \$74 billion in domestic and foreign law enforcement since 1981.¹⁸ Defense spending has increased from \$83 million in 1985, to \$200 million in 1988, \$438 million in 1989, \$822 million in 1996, and \$957 million in 1997. The current level of funding buys 65-80,000 hours of aircraft time (including 1448 hours of scarce AWACS time¹⁹) and 1,600 Navy ship-days in addition to about 8,000 personnel involved on the ground and in support functions.²⁰ The National Guard has more personnel assigned to counter-narcotics than the DEA has agents.²¹

Since 1989 the military has spent more than \$7 billion for counter-narcotics, all in support of a policy which has demonstrated no capacity for success. Military involvement should have ended long ago. But as former Assistant Secretary of Defense Lawrence Korb, said of the military's role "It should have been a temporary stopgap, but it's been institutionalized."²²

Prospects and Trends for the Future

If drug interdiction has been unsuccessful against the drug problem to date, the prospects are even less promising for the future. There will be a continued trend toward diffusion of smuggling routes and sophistication of methods, with more types of drugs being smuggled and more organizations involved. In the recent past, only marijuana trafficking has been

¹⁷ Bertram and Sharpe

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Jim McGee, "Military Seeks Balance in Delicate Mission: The Drug War," The Washington Post, 29 November 1996

²⁰ DOD statistics provided by Ms. Chris Lin, Special Assistant to the Principal Deputy Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict. Also from Jim McGee, "Military Seeks Balance in Delicate Mission: The Drug War," The Washington Post, 29 November 1996

²¹ Colonel David Friestad, National Guard counter-drug coordinator, cited by Jim McGee, "Military Seeks Balance in Delicate Mission: The Drug War," The Washington Post, 29 November 1996

²² McGee

significantly disrupted by interdiction, and that was due to the drug's relative bulk as compared to cocaine or heroin. None of the other drugs commonly smuggled, or likely to be smuggled, have that disadvantage.

Of the three primary drugs of abuse in this country, only cocaine is marginally amenable to in-transit interdiction (because bulk shipments still move along known routes). Unfortunately, the trend for the future is toward drugs that are either, like marijuana, produced domestically, or, like heroin, smuggled into the country in such small amounts that they are easy to conceal and almost impossible to seize in quantities that might disrupt the economics of the drug trade.

Some of the emerging dangers include a return to previously popular drugs such as phencyclidine (PCP) and LSD. Many observers think the nightmare drugs of the future will be the so called designer or synthetic drugs, such as methadone, methamphetamine, and MDMA²³ that can be manufactured anywhere from legal ingredients, and with a minimum of skill and equipment.²⁴

Heroin is especially likely to become more prevalent. The much improved purity of heroin now entering the country means that the drug does not have to be injected, a development that is already making it much more popular. After remaining stable for 20 years, the number of heroin users jumped 20 percent in 1995 with most of the increase among teenagers and young adults.²⁵ Colombian smuggling organizations are moving into the heroin market, shifting production from traditional Asian fields to Mexico and Colombia. And heroin is presently ten to twenty times more profitable than cocaine.²⁶ In most regions of the world heroin is the drug of choice and it may become so in the United States. There is plenty of product. Global heroin

²³ Methylendioxyamphetamine, also known as Ecstasy

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), March 1996, 2

²⁵ Ibid., 10

production has increased 60 percent in the last 8 years, with less than five percent of the total going to the U S market, indicating a large potential for market growth

Probably the most disturbing trend in narcotics control is the growth in the number of smuggling groups and their willingness to cooperate Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, Robert Gelbard, has referred to this broad, informal alliance of diverse smuggling organizations as a "*pax mafiosi*"²⁶ Smuggling groups that have, or are establishing, American markets include the Russian mafia, Chinese triads, Nigerians, South Africans, and even Albanians

This growth in the number of cooperating smuggling groups will undoubtedly be accompanied by a collateral expansion of routes and methods For example, just as heroin production is moving into this hemisphere, cocaine production could be shifted to Africa (There is nothing that constrains cocaine production to the Andes) Growth of the drug consumer markets around the world will lead to those region's use as way points for drugs en route the United States (e g , cocaine entering the U S via Europe or Japan)

It is noteworthy that current interdiction efforts attempt to erect a barrier between our southern border and the cocaine source countries to our south As large an area of operations as that is, it is a fraction of our total Customs border area of 96,000 miles, which in addition to the 50 states includes U S possessions, such as Puerto Rico and Guam In the future, there will be no discrete threat axis along which to erect a barrier Drugs will enter the United States anywhere along our vast perimeter

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Quoted by Douglas Farah, "New Threat From Colombia Heroin," The Washington Post, 27 March 1997

Conclusion

Our drug strategy is clear about the goals of interdiction, but none of those goals has been achieved. Nor are there any hopeful signs that they may be achieved. The conclusion is clear: Interdiction failed against the cocaine and marijuana threats which were relatively discreet and geographically confined, just as it failed against heroin twenty years ago. The utility of interdiction, already very low, can only decline as the threat becomes more diverse.

So if interdiction holds no promise for solving the nation's drug problem, what are we to do? A recent RAND study looking at that question estimated that the cost to reduce cocaine consumption by one percent would be \$783 million through increased source country controls, \$366 million through increased interdiction, or \$34 million through treatment of abusers. Treatment was by far the only option which had the potential to pay for itself through direct benefits to society (i.e., lowered crime and medical costs, return of abusers to productivity).²⁷

We should shift resources to demand reduction efforts. And we need to make a scrupulous assessment of the entire spectrum of supply reduction and law enforcement efforts (e.g., crop substitution, attacking money laundering, etc.) and shift emphasis to the most promising programs. Interdiction should probably not be abolished, but continued at greatly reduced levels. Law enforcement, education, and other efforts do discourage casual drug use. But our national efforts need to be reprogrammed with greater sensitivity to costs and benefits.

Popular media coverage tends to portray the United States' drug problem as something which emerged rather suddenly during the 1960s and which has grown worse with each decade. In fact, America's narcotics problem has been with us since the early part of the nineteenth

²⁷ C. Peter Rydell and Susan S. Everingham, *Controlling Cocaine, Supply Versus Demand Programs*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1994), 24 and xvi-xvii.

century. But the media's characterization of the problem as something aberrant and recent encourages the public to think that the problem is amenable to some sort of quick fix.²⁸

But the nation's narcotics habit is an enduring problem, common to virtually every society on the globe. It is not going to be solved by law enforcement, with or without the military's help. Addressing the likelihood of success in war, Sun Tzu said, "That which depends on me, I can do, that which depends on the enemy cannot be certain." In counter-narcotics, too much depends on the enemy.

After many years of experience, we now know that interdiction is not contributing to winning the war against drugs. And with the military's unique capabilities in high demand in the service of other national security objectives, the Pentagon must resist pressure to squander scarce resources in pursuit of a failed strategy. To do otherwise will eventually expose the services to sharp criticism. We must renew the debate over military employment in counter-narcotics and work to ensure that the military's limited resources are wisely employed in advancing well-founded objectives.

²⁸ Alfred W. McCoy and Alan A. Block, *War on Drugs, Studies in the Failure of U.S. Narcotics Policy*, (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1992) 8.

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